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AUTHOR DeCapua, Andrea; Arnold, Vicki
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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are offered for using the following items in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom: mail-order catalogs, maps, photograph albums, and posters. A sample lesson plan for one week is provided. (JB)

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Creative Materials Development

Andrea DeCapua
Vicki Arnold

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ESL teachers frequently find they need to supplement their textbooks with outside materials. Since students are individuals, each with a particular learning style, every class is different. Thus, any existing curriculum requires tailoring to allow for changing student needs. Useful in achieving this end can be the creative adaptation of non-scholastic materials. First, it provides greater opportunities for students to develop and use English language skills in meaningful, communicative settings. Secondly, it is a means of introducing valuable cultural information. And finally, it adds variety to the classroom. Furthermore, such materials are readily available. Virtually anything has the potential to become a teaching aid--it only requires a little imagination and creativity.

In this paper we offer suggestions for creative teaching materials development, suggestions which ESL teachers can easily adapt to fit their own classroom needs. While we may have aimed our suggestions at particular proficiency levels, there is no reason why these ideas could not be used at almost any level. This paper is certainly not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of this subject; rather we hope ESL teachers will find they can utilize some of our suggestions as springboards for developing their own materials.

1. The Mail Order Catalog

In addition to considering the four skill areas when selecting classroom materials, it is advisable to choose things which will aid the ESL student in understanding American life and culture, and help him develop the ability to interact comfortably in American society. An example of a material that serves this dual purpose is the mail order catalog.[1] There are so many types of catalogs that one can use--most are free or have a minimal cost, and all are easily obtained from department stores, equipment manufacturers, and many more.

Initial class discussion can center around some of the techniques used in mail-order catalogs to "sell" a product. The teacher may want to direct students/ attention to how vocabulary, tone and grammar usage are used in advertisements to influence buyers' choice. Students can compare how selling techniques avry among different kinds of products and catalogs by considering such questions as: To which senses are the advertisements trying to appeal? What type of consumer is Catalog X trying to attract? What kinds of adjectives are used in advertisements for Product B in Catalog Y? How do these differ from the adjectives used in Catalog Z for the same product?

After the discussion, students can write their own advertisements, using excerpts from catalogs as models. Students can later share their "ads", and the class may even be encouraged to vote on the advertisement that best "sold" them. Students can also prepare longer advertisements which would be suitalbe for broadcast as radio commercials and present these to other classes.

Most mail order catalogs contain extensive information about guarantees, credit plans, shipping and delivery information and more. Reading for specific information is important in non-academic reading such as this, as well as for educational purposes, and it is important that the students be familiar with the technique of skimming for this type of reading. To start the students off, the instructor can bring in several pages from an old telephone book which have been cut into columns. Attached to each column is a series of three tasks which the students must complete. In the first exercise, the students are given a name which they must locate by quickly scanning the column. When they have found the name, they must write the corresponding address and phone number. The students must complete this exercise within a set time period, say one minute. In the second exercise the students are given the address, and must supply the name and telephone number. For this task we allow a little more time than for the previous one. In the third exercise the students are given a telephone number, and must furnish the name and address. This activity is more difficult than the first two, and adequate time should be allotted, about 2½ minutes.

We find using a telephone book more helpful than using a reading passage for introducing the technique of skimming. There is less distraction from surrounding words, thus making it easier to focus the students' attention on the skimming process itself. The telephone book also employs a number of important visual clues such as bold versus fine print, and alphabetization, which students need to learn to recognize and use in

reading and interpreting reading materials. Later, as students feel comfortable using this technique, they can begin to work on passages taken from a catalog. At first the teacher distributes a list of questions on information contained in the reading passage. This way the students know beforehand just what they need to look for as they read. As the students become more skilled at simming, they teacher can wait to distribute the questions until after they have already scanned the reading.

Using the mail order catalog for spoken activities can aid the students in developing cultural sensitivity. Possible topics include: What items in a particular catalog reflect some characteristics of American culture? Which items sell well in the north and not in the south. Why? Which items would be most popular in a city? In the country? With young people? With senior citizens? In which seasons? For what holidays? The list is endless, and student answers will stimulate further questions and responses among the members of the class.

Problem-solving activities based on segments of a mail order catalog can be done in pairs or small groups. For example: You have $XX, you want to buy:

a) equipment for a camping trip
b) a kitchen appliance
c) clothing for winter skiing
d) a wedding gift for a couple who already has "everything"

Further activites for spoken and listening skills development that can be incorporated into this unit are roleplays on applying for a credit card, placing telephone orders, returning

merchandise that broke while under warrantee, and calling for information about a product. More proficient students can actually visit stores to gather information.[3]

2. Maps

Local, regional and state maps have a variety of uses. Not only can they be used to develop and/or improve competency in giving and receiving directions, but they can provide the basis for conversation practice, impromptu speeches, and creative writing assignments. For example, given the name of a town such as Williamsville or Peterstown, a student pretends he is one of the founders of that town, and must explain why the town was named for that particular person. Other activities focus on towns with somewhat unusual names--Painted Post, Horseheads, Bath--or for a foreign city or country--Geneva, Hamburg, Peru, Mexico. Students think of reasons why the original residents might have chose such a name for their community; they invent imaginary characters from those towns; they describe the kinds of houses there. These can be oral or written exercises, or a combination of the two. And certainly these are just a few of the possibilities.

3. Photograph Albums

Photographs can provide the stimulus for unusual discussions and writing assignments. Students can write biographies of family members and friends, or they can recount the story behind a particular photograph. They may want to compare and

contrast differences in clothing styles over the years or among different cultures. Students can describe places, feelings or people in photographs; they can discuss a significant event in their lives.

More specifically, one photograph can be used for an in-class writing and discussion activity such as the following. The teacher divides the class into small groups, shows them a photograph, and explains:

> We are going to work together to write a story about this picture. Group one is going to write the beginning, Groups two and three the middle, and Group four the ending.* As your group writes its portion of the story, don't let the other groups see or [redacted] hear what you are doing. When everyone has finished, we'll put all the pieces together, and have our story.

While the students are writing, the teacher moves among the groups to help them with any problems they are having, and to help them correct grammatical errors.

This is a rather fun writing exercise for students. They have the opportunity to interact with one another in English, and the results are always humorous. The teacher can take this activity even further by encouraging class discussion on the story itself with questions such as: Why did group four choose to end the story this way? How would you have ended it? Why? Why did group three write such a middle? What does it do to the beginning? And so on.

*The number and size of groups would vary with the size of the class.

4. Posters

Posters are some of the most useful, easily found and inexpensive teaching materials available. A poster need not be particularly beautiful or original, but merely offer something that may become part of a lesson. For instance, we came across a VISTA "Volunteers for America" poster which we found quite suitable for classroom use. It pictured a poverty-stricken Appalachian family engaged in various activities around their ramshackle farmhouse. To initiate a lesson using this poster, the teacher can begin with a lecture on such a topic as rural America, the plight of the poor, what is poverty, the contrasts between rich and poor in the United States, etc. Or, the teacher can choose to start off with a reading from an appropriate novel, magazine or newspaper article. Once the teacher has finished the presentation, the students can talk about it. This discussion can begin with comprehension questions, and later the students may take part in less-structured discussion, perhaps centering around their personal reactions to the poster and the lecture/reading.

5. Sample Lesson Plan

In this final section we have chosen to present a somewhat detailed mini-lesson to illustrate the range of possibilities for using non-academic materials in the classroom. In reading this section, please keep in mind that we are presenting this particular lesson within a flexible framework that can be used as a guide in developing similar lessons on a variety of other

topics at different proficiency levels.

The following is a general outline of objectives for a week's lesson. We like to use such an outline in order to remind ourselves and our students just what we are doing and why.

Lesson Objectives

1. To improve aural comprehension
2. To improve specific writing skills
   (These are determined by students' needs)
3. To develop understanding of specific grammar points
   (These are determined by students' needs, previous lesson material, problems that arise in the course of assignments.)
4. To improve specific reading skills
5. To develop the four skill areas in an integrated manner by promoting better understanding and communication among class members and their social environment through:
   a) simulations of life situations
   b) encouraging class members to interact freely with one another in meaningful contexts using English.

First, the objectives of the week's lesson are briefly reviewed with the students, and they are given a schedule of activities and assignment due dates. The lesson itself--"The Trip"--begins with an introductory reading of a selected passage from a travel diary, a travel brochure, a travel guide, or perhaps something original by the teacher.

After the initial presentation, the teacher moves on to comprehension questions, vocabulary review, and a discussion which includes possible roleplay projects: Where the class is going to travel to, possible roles and situations. For example, if the students decide that the roleplay is going to be a trip

to Florida, then roles can include airline ticket clerk, travel agent, hotel manager, restaurant waitress, taxicab driver and tour guide. If, however, the students choose to take their imaginary trip outside the United States, others roles will be needed: bank teller for money exchange, consulate officer for visas, and so on.

Next the students choose their roles and break into small groups or pairs to prepare their roles. For homework, the students must write a brief description as to who they they are going to be and what they will be doing. The teacher, of course, will have to help the students select roles appropriate to their level of English, as well as provide useful vocabulary, phrases and structures.

On the second day, the students turn in their homework and go directly into practicing their role-playing. To make this more interesting and realistic, travel brochures, timetables, and pictures can be brought to class, preferably by the students themselves. By the end of the class period, every student should be familiar with his role.

This day's homework assignment asks the students to begin preparing their own travel brochures or itineraries. The students, using commercial travel literature, must write and design similar material for their role. For example, a student who is roleplaying hotel manager would write a few paragraphs describing his hotel, what it has to offer, etc. Likewise, a student roleplaying travel guide would describe where the tour is going. The completed assignment is not due until the end

of this entire unit, but students are encouraged to consult with the teacher on any problems they may be encountering. For lower levels, the teacher may wish to allot class time for working on this project.

The third day involves somewhat different class activities. The teacher reviews pertinent idioms, does some pronumciation drills, and sound and word discrimination exercises on problems that arose during the roleplays. The teacher also has a number of mini-situations prepared on index cards which s/he passes out to the students. These include such situations as: going out for dinner and finding an error in the check; losing one's way in a strange city; driving on the highway and having the car break down; going to the theater and finding one's zipper is broken; etc.. These mini-roleplays give the students the chance to practice impromptu speaking, and the opportunity to enact different roles within the context of the travel unit.

For homework the students are asked to look in newspapapers and magazines for the idioms convered in class or others imilar to them. They must also continue to work on their "brochures".

The fourth day is spent on structure review. By this time the teacher has had the opportunity to look at some of the students' written work and notice their common trouble spots and weaknesses. S/he incorporates these problem areas into a grammar lesson. For instance, the teacher sees that a number of students are having difficulty with the passive voice.

Accordingly the teacher goes over the structure and reinforces it through written and oral exercises relevant to the unit. Students can also refer to the travel literature to see how the structure is used in context.

For the following day the students are requested to prepare a short speech--3-5 minutes--on a trip they have taken, as well as to finish their "brochures".

On the last day of this unit, the students are given a short quiz. They must also present their speeches and turn in their projects. Finally, the students are asked for a brief oral evaluation of the week's lesson: Were the objectives met? Did they learn anything? What? What did they like best? Least? What would they change?

As a follow-up exercise, the students do further reading on an area of interest to them. For instance, if in planning the "trip", someone became interested in the history or geography of a particular region, he is encouraged to read more about it. The teacher may even want to take the entire class to a library in order to assist the students in choosing materials appropriate to their reading ability.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize our belief that virtually anything can be regarded as a potential teaching aid. The one essential requirement is a teacher with an active imagination and a receptiveness to new and different ideas. In this paper we have tried to suggest some creative classroom

uses of non-academic materials. As stated earlier, this paper is not an all-inclusive discussion of creative materials development, but an attempt to offer some ideas which will be stimulating to other ESL teachers looking for ways to supplement their curricula. Although in the course of this paper we have concerned ourselves exclusively with the ESL teacher working in the United States, many of these ideas can certainly be used in other teaching situations.

FOOTNOTES

1. For further information see also Timothy M. Scanlon, "French Mail-Order Catalogs as Teaching Tools: Vocabulary, Culture and Conversation," The French Review, Vol. LII, No. 2, December, 1978.

2. Christina Bratt Paulston and Howard Selekman, "Interaction Activities in the Foreign Language Classroom, or How to Grow a Tulip-Rose", Foreign Language Annals, Vol. 9, No. 3 May, 1976.

3. Ibid.